

Choosing a Technical Service Provider

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Are you applying for a USDA cost-share program such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)? If so, you may have the option to decide who will provide all or part of the conservation technical assistance. You may choose the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or a technical service provider (TSP). TSPs are individual consultants, businesses, or agencies certified by NRCS to provide technical services. Within limitations, the full cost to hire a TSP may be written into your conservation contract.

The option to hire a TSP was created in the 2002 Farm Bill. Therefore, deciding between NRCS and numerous TSPs will likely be a new experience for you. This fact sheet: (1) suggests some key points for you to consider when deciding who will provide your technical assistance, (2) explains how you locate certified TSPs, and (3) provides tips for hiring and working with a TSP.

The Choice Is Yours: NRCS or TSP

For each item in your EQIP contract, you may have the option of having NRCS or a TSP provide the required technical assistance. This means that some or all of your technical assistance can be provided by TSPs and NRCS will provide partial or full funding. When deciding between NRCS and TSP assistance, you should consider the following:

Timeliness of Assistance. Due to the rising demand for technical assistance, NRCS staff are challenged with increasing workloads. Therefore, you may face time delays when using NRCS. TSPs may deliver assistance in a more timely fashion.

Flexibility to Select the Individual Providing Assistance. If you select NRCS, you will not play a role in choosing the individual staff member assigned to provide technical assistance. When selecting a TSP, you may be able to choose the individual, business, or agency providing assistance from a list of NRCS-certified TSPs. This list can be found on the Internet at <http://techreg.usda.gov/CustLocateTSP.aspx>.

Qualifications. Years of experience, education, and training will vary among individual NRCS staff and TSPs. If you have not worked with local NRCS

staff or a TSP, talk with farmers who have received the technical assistance you are requesting. For some complex systems, such as methane digesters, TSPs offer specialized experience that NRCS cannot provide. Technical service provider resumes and specialty areas can be found on the Internet at <http://techreg.usda.gov/CustLocateTSP.aspx>.

Confidentiality of Records. NRCS is subject to the federal Privacy Act and cannot share records about individuals. TSPs do not fall under this act. Therefore, if you are concerned about confidentiality, consider developing a privacy agreement with your TSP.

Certification for Payments. If you select NRCS, the agency is responsible for certifying completion of work for cost share payment. If you select a TSP, work and payment agreements are between you and the TSP for the service they provide. You and the TSP are responsible for certifying completion of work to NRCS for cost share payment.

Legal Responsibility. NRCS and TSPs are each legally responsible for the technical assistance they provide.

Paying for Technical Service. When NRCS provides technical assistance, there is no cost to you. If you select a TSP, you will be reimbursed their fees by NRCS, up to an established "Not to Exceed" rate base on the type, size, and complexity of service being performed. Any costs beyond this rate will have to be agreed upon between you and the TSP, and you will be responsible for the additional cost. A guide to the "Not to Exceed Rates" for Pennsylvania can be found on the Internet at <http://www.tsp-nte.nrcs.usda.gov/>. The actual reimbursement rates for use in your contract will be calculated by NRCS.

One-Time Reimbursement Subject to Contract. After the practice is implemented and you and the TSP certify that it is done according to the Pennsylvania Technical Guide, NRCS will provide you with a one-time only reimbursement payment for TSP assistance. Farmers will be paid only the amount stipulated in the contract for the technical service provider. Farmers may voluntarily choose to personally pay more for TSP assistance.

Locating Certified TSPs In Your Area

Review the Current List of Certified TSPs. You are responsible for selecting a TSP that is certified by NRCS in the state where the contract applies. Additionally, the TSP must be certified in the specific technical service “category” (such as Manure and Wastewater Handling and Storage) and “service” for the conservation practice(s) (such as Heavy Use Area Protection) in your contract. The current list of certified providers is available on the Web at <http://techreg.usda.gov/CustLocateTSP.aspx>.

Selecting a TSP

Look Carefully at Qualifications. It is your responsibility to select a TSP who will do the job correctly. Ask for written proposals with cost details.

Consider Referrals from Other Farmers. Ask for feedback from farmers who have recently worked with the TSP on similar projects.

Interview Several TSPs Face-to-Face. Take the time to meet personally with several providers face-to-face. Ask them for references from similar projects.

Discuss How Unforeseen Events Will be Handled. Few projects go exactly as planned. Discuss how you and your TSP will communicate about unforeseen circumstances. Ask for specific examples illustrating how they have found satisfactory and timely solutions to unforeseen problems.

Scope of Service. The TSP should be prepared to describe in detail the scope of services required to implement the work you are contacting them to do. This includes design, construction or implementation quality assurance, and final certification.

Do Not Only Consider Cost. When making your decision, cost is an important consideration, but not the only one. Consider qualifications, quality assurance, communications, and timeliness.

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Reminders: Entering Into Work and Payment Agreements

Agreements Are Between You and the TSP. The TSP is legally responsible for technical assistance provided. You and the TSP are responsible for ensuring that the work agreement, including conformance with Pennsylvania Technical Guide standards, is met.

One-Time Reimbursement Subject to Contract.

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